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“Whither *RAD*”

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Whither RAD

Do We Continue the “Voyage of RAD” or Prepare for the “New Canoe”?

GREG BAK, CREIGHTON BARRETT,
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Over the last decade, the Canadian Council of Archives (CCA) has made some efforts toward updating the *Canadian Rules for Archival Description (RAD)*, a national archival descriptive standard that it publishes and maintains. The council convened a national meeting to discuss the “future of RAD” in 2016¹ and supported the development of a new standard for archival accession records, published in 2019.² In February 2023, CCA announced that it had recently voted to “amalgamate the RAD Committee and the Standards Committee to form a new Standards Committee.”³ CCA convened the first meeting of the new Standards Committee in March 2024 and supported its activities until October 2024, when the CCA Board of Directors decided to “pause this work.”⁴ We write as former members of this CCA committee. As working archivists and as archival educators, all of us have long-standing interests in standards for archival description. We

1 Canadian Council of Archives, Meeting on the Future of the Rules for Archival Description, Ottawa, ON, February 4, 2016.

2 National Archival Accession Standard Working Group, *Canadian Archival Information Standard*, version Final 1.0 (Ottawa, ON: Canadian Council of Archives, May 2019), https://archivescanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/CAAIS_2019May15_EN.pdf.

3 Yves Lapointe, CCA chair, email message to Arcan-L, February 2, 2023, <https://mailman.srv.ualberta.ca/mailman/private/arcan-l/2023-February/013888.html>. It is unclear if the RAD committee mentioned in the email was an active CCA committee, and if so, who was on the committee or what it was doing. There is no information about this committee on the CCA website.

4 J.M. McCutcheon, email message to members of the CCA Standards Committee on behalf of the CCA Board of Directors, November 19, 2024.

were dismayed by our experience on the committee and by the lack of information or apparent action in the weeks and months since the committee was disbanded. We have written this note to describe for the wider Canadian archival community the history and status of efforts to revise or replace RAD and to make an urgent call for us to move this work forward in light of commitments that we, as a community, have already made through the *Reconciliation Framework* for Canadian archives.⁵

Our title contrasts two metaphors from the literature. In 1993, Kent Haworth compared the development of RAD to the European “voyages of discovery,” traveling “from the old world to the new world of information management.”⁶ Twenty years later, in 2014, Tahltan archivist and librarian Camille Callison characterized Indigenous libraries, archives, and museums as “Indigenous peoples’ new canoe,” “used to carry the language and culture to future generations.”⁷ Which is our guiding metaphor today? Should archivists continue our Eurocentric voyage of discovery? Or can archives become a distinctive feature of contemporary Indigenous and non-Indigenous societies on Turtle Island? We believe these questions can only be answered through open discussion and debate across Canadian archival communities. We hope this note stimulates that discussion.

RAD and Its Revisions

Efforts to develop the first version of RAD began in earnest with the establishment of the Canadian Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards in 1983. The working group published its report, *Toward Descriptive Standards*, in 1985, and the Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards (PCDS) was created as a committee of the Bureau of Canadian Archivists to implement the report’s

5 Steering Committee on Canada’s Archives, *Reconciliation Framework: The Response to the Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Taskforce* (n.p.: Steering Committee on Canada’s Archives, 2022), <https://archives2026.com/response-to-the-report-of-the-truth-and-reconciliation-commission-taskforce/>.

6 Kent M. Haworth, “The Voyage of RAD: From the Old World to the New,” *Archivaria* 35 (Spring 1993): 55–63, 55, 61.

7 Camille Callison, “Indigenous Peoples’ New Canoe,” in *Aboriginal and Visible Minority Librarians: Oral Histories from Canada*, ed. Deborah Lee and Mahalakshmi Kumaran (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), chap. 13, 135.

recommendations.⁸ Working groups were established to develop recommendations for describing different media types, and an additional working group focused on describing records at the fonds level. The first general chapters of *RAD* were published in 1990, while chapters on audiovisual and electronic records continued to be developed through 1996.⁹ “The mandate of the PCDS ran out at the end of the 1995/96 fiscal year,” and standards development was taken over by “its successor body,” the Canadian Committee on Archival Description (CCAD), a committee within the CCA.¹⁰

By the mid-1990s, interest in a common North American description standard was growing. The Toronto Accord (1999) set out principles and a framework for creating a unified North American standard, from which the Canada–US Task Force on Archival Description (CUSTARD) was established in 2001.¹¹ Differences in approach and archival principles caused a breakdown of the task force, and in lieu of a shared standard, the Society of American Archivists (SAA) published *Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS)*¹² while CCAD produced “RAD₂,” which was circulated to the Canadian archival community but neither approved nor published.¹³ Instead, a light revision of the existing standard was released as

8 Bureau of Canadian Archivists, Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards, *Toward Descriptive Standards: Report on Recommendations of the Canadian Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards* (Ottawa, ON: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 1985); Hugo L.P. Stibbe, “Archival Descriptive Standards and the Archival Community: A Retrospective, 1996,” *Archivaria* 41 (Spring 1996): 259–74. The Bureau of Canadian Archivists had been established in 1976 to enable collaboration between the national archival associations of French and English Canada. Ian Wilson, “Archives,” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, last edited July 27, 2015, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/archives>.

9 As most readers will know, the structure of *RAD* was based on the (then-current) *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules (AACR2)* and the *International Standard Bibliographic Description (ISBD)* and was informed by the “archival principles governing the arrangement and description of a fonds and its parts.” Bureau of Canadian Archivists, *Rules for Archival Description*, rev. ed. (Ottawa, ON: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 2008), xviii–xix, rule 0.22.

10 Stibbe, “Archival Descriptive Standards and the Archival Community,” 264. The CCA, established in 1985, “assumes leadership within the Canadian archival community and provides coordination and strategic planning,” including “the establishment of principles, standards, and national priorities.” Standards Committee, Canadian Council of Archives, *Institutional Guidelines for Archives* (Ottawa, ON: Canadian Council of Archives, 2001), 4, https://archivescanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/GuideSmallArchives_EN.pdf.

11 Jean Dryden, “Cooking the Perfect Custard,” *Archival Science* 3, no. 1 (2003): 27–42.

12 Society of American Archivists, “Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS),” SAA, last updated November 30, 2022, <https://www2.archivists.org/groups/technical-subcommittee-on-describing-archives-a-content-standard-dacs/describing-archives-a-content-standard-dacs-second->.

13 Dancy, “RAD Past, Present, and Future,” *Archivaria* 74 (Fall 2012): 7–41, 9.

RAD 2008, incorporating aspects of RAD2 that were positively received during consultation. As of 2012, CCAD was no longer an active committee within CCA.

In 2012, Richard Dancy published an article on the history of RAD, outlining its strengths and weaknesses, comparing it to *ISAD(G): General International Standard for Archival Description*, and recommending pathways forward.¹⁴ This article proved influential, and in 2015, there was a new effort to update and revise RAD. The CCA circulated a feedback survey in November and December of 2015 to solicit opinions on the feasibility of continuing with RAD, revising it, or replacing it with a new or existing standard.¹⁵ In early 2016, CCA held a meeting of “archival professionals and educators” at Library and Archives Canada (LAC) to discuss the findings and decide next steps.¹⁶ At this meeting, a set of 20 recommendations were arrived at via consensus; these included the desire to maintain a Canadian standard and to revise it to better meet evolving needs.¹⁷ CCA did not publicly take action to address the recommendations until 2023.

How We Got to Now: The Creation and Dissolution of a New CCA Standards Committee

In February 2023, the CCA sent an email to Arcan-L, the Canadian archival listserv, indicating that “the future of descriptive standards in Canada” would be on the agenda for the February CCA general assembly meeting.¹⁸ The email included a link to a survey that asked Canadian archivists three main questions: “How does RAD inform discovery in your institution?” “Does RAD conflict with how your database is designed (the structure standard)?” and “Are there

¹⁴ Dancy, “RAD Past, Present and Future.”

¹⁵ Canadian Council of Archives, “CCAD Meeting of Experts: Information for the Survey and Regional Consultations,” Canadian Council of Archives, October 26, 2015, https://web.archive.org/web/20160208070033/http://www.cdncouncilarchives.ca:80/survey/CCADMtgExperts_EN.pdf.

¹⁶ Richard Dancy and Christina Nichols, “Give Us Your Thoughts on the Rules for Archival Description (RAD),” *Librarianship.ca*, November 20, 2015, <https://librarianship.ca/news/consultation-rad/>.

¹⁷ An eight-part video playlist of the Meeting on the Future of the Rules for Archival Description is available on the CCA’s YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@canadiancouncilofarchives2740>.

¹⁸ Lapointe, email message to Arcan-L, February 2, 2023.

alternate descriptive standards you have been (seriously) looking at?”¹⁹ A fourth question asked for any other suggestions or information the respondent wished to provide. The survey included a box respondents could tick if they were interested in volunteering on “a committee to consider the future of RAD.”²⁰

In February 2024, the CCA Board of Directors agreed to “reconstitute the Standards Committee based on community discussion and interest with regard to work previously undertaken to discuss revisions” to RAD.²¹ The re-established Standards Committee met for the first time in March 2024. After attendees questioned whether the committee was sufficiently representative of the profession, CCA made another effort to recruit members through an open call on Arcan-L.²² At the first meeting, the board-appointed committee chair presented draft terms of reference and laid out a tentative agenda that involved communicating a statement of principles to the archival community; reviewing existing descriptive standards, including RAD; assessing their strengths and weaknesses; and making a recommendation to the CCA board about how to revise RAD based on that assessment process.²³ The committee met regularly until July 2024.

From the beginning, the proposed approach was to create several working groups, each assigned to assess an existing standard – e.g., RAD, DACS, ISAD(G), and *Records in Context (RiC)*. Several members of the committee (including all the authors of this note) raised concerns about this approach. Concerns included the following: (1) the committee had not yet done the work to understand what a revised standard needed to do (i.e., What problems were we trying to fix? What were we looking for in a standard?); (2) the committee was not sufficiently representative of Canadian archival communities; and (3) the committee had not yet seriously engaged with the *Reconciliation Framework: The Response to the Truth*

19 Canadian Council of Archives, “Future of RAD/L’avenir des RDDA” (survey form), Canadian Council of Archives, accessed February 18, 2025, <https://form.jotform.com/230325313519246>.

20 Canadian Council of Archives, “Future of RAD/L’avenir des RDDA.”

21 J.M. McCutcheon, CCA executive director, email message to Arcan-L, May 8, 2024, <https://mailman.srv.ualberta.ca/mailman/private/arcan-l/2024-May/014875.html>. The email message was also published on the Association of Canadian Archivists’ website; see J.M. McCutcheon, “CCA Update – Standards Committee,” Association of Canadian Archivists, May 8, 2024, <https://archivists.ca/Latest-News-Announcements/13353874>.

22 McCutcheon, email message to Arcan-L, May 8, 2024.

23 Terms of reference for the Standards Committee can be found on the CCA website. Canadian Council of Archives, “Standards Committee: Mandate and Terms of Reference” [draft], Archives Canada, accessed February 18, 2025, https://archivescanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Standards_MandateToFRENCH.pdf.

and Reconciliation Commission Taskforce, which explicitly states that any revision of RAD or development of new descriptive standards should “support leadership by First Nations, Inuit, and Métis heritage professionals and the establishment of a working group or committee to lead this work.”²⁴

On this last point, members of the committee felt it especially important to understand the CCA’s position as an organization that has endorsed the *Reconciliation Framework*. The committee asked the CCA to explain the Standards Committee’s mandate with respect to the *Reconciliation Framework* and with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action more broadly. The message received from the CCA board was that the committee was to focus on finding a “practical” way forward. Then, on October 3, 2024, the CCA board circulated an email to committee members stating that the board had decided to take “a brief step back from the process initiated” in March 2024.²⁵ The board asked committee members to sign up for sub-groups that would be part of a “Working Group on Archival Description Standards” while the CCA board reviewed the Standards Committee’s draft terms of reference. These sub-groups were organized around existing standards – RAD, ISAD(G), RiC, and DACS – with a separate working group for “Reconciliation/Equity Diversity Inclusion.”²⁶

In response to this email, the five authors of this note wrote a joint letter to the CCA board explaining why we continued to think that it was premature to break into working groups without an agreed-upon set of principles derived from a robust analysis of the issues that Canadian archivists are dealing with. Many of these issues are substantially different than those the 1991 and 2008 principles were intended to address. We wondered how existing standards could be evaluated if there was no agreed-upon set of criteria against which we were assessing them, and we felt that – given the different expertise, experience, and priorities of committee members – the analysis within sub-groups could only be lopsided. The letter also raised several concerns about the committee structure and processes (discussed in more detail below).

²⁴ Steering Committee on Canada’s Archives, *Reconciliation Framework*, 55.

²⁵ Charlotte Forbes, National Archival Appraisal Board Coordinator, email to members of the CCA Standards Committee, October 3, 2024.

²⁶ Forbes, October 3, 2024.

The CCA Board of Directors discussed our letter at their next meeting and sent an email to the committee members on November 19, 2024, acknowledging that concerns had been raised via formal and informal channels and recognizing that the organization of working groups went against recommendations made in the final report of the Association of Canadian Archivists' (ACA) Indigenous Matters Working Group (specifically, recommendations against the "siloeing of Indigenous-centred topics").²⁷ The email explained that the CCA board was pausing the work of the Standards Committee and that a new CCA committee would be appointed to monitor the work of the International Council on Archives (ICA) Expert Group on Archival Description (EGAD) and the development of the RiC Application Guidelines (forthcoming). This email effectively ended the work of the Standards Committee, to which we had been appointed.

A (Subjective) Autopsy of the CCA Standards Committee

Our experience on the CCA Standards Committee left us unsure of what had happened. We engaged in discussions over several months, but there appeared to be little momentum in the work of the committee, and topics were often rehashed at each meeting. For example, committee members identified inconsistencies between the draft terms of reference for the committee and the committee's actual practices, asking for clarification on certain points, especially around how the CCA would endorse a new or revised standard. These questions were not adequately addressed even as the board attempted to organize working groups. It is unclear who was providing direction to the chairperson and how responses to committee questions were developed. The responses to questions and to our open letter felt like significant escalations and seemed explicitly designed to prevent the committee from digging into the work.

Members of the committee also asserted the importance of identifying and understanding the issues or gaps that a new standard would be expected to address. Many archival scholars and practising archivists, for example, have

²⁷ ACA Indigenous Matters Working Group, *Final Report to the Association of Canadian Archivists from the Indigenous Matters Working Group: Assessment & Recommendations* (n.p.: Association of Canadian Archivists, July 2024), 9, <https://archivists.ca/resources/Documents/IMWG.Final.Report-July.29.2024.pdf>.

noted that *RAD* struggles to represent provenancial context beyond a single creator, is wholly inadequate to describing digital records, and is based on Eurocentric worldviews. Our attempts to develop a sound methodology for doing the work in a thoughtful and transparent way were met with top-down impositions of expectations regarding how the work would be done. Fundamental questions about what we were trying to achieve did not receive necessary attention, and by the time we were to break into working groups, these questions had not been adequately acknowledged, let alone resolved.

The committee primarily consisted of archival scholars and educators and practising archivists. While committee members represented different geographical areas and were situated in different types of institutions, there was no representation by Indigenous, Black, and People of Colour (IBPOC) scholars or archivists, nor was there representation from non-mainstream archival institutions (e.g., community archives, artist-run centres, etc.). There seemed to be a plan for consultations at some point, but the nature and timing of these consultations was never discussed. Members on the committee expressed a need for serious engagement with Indigenous archivists and memory keepers and with archivists working with Indigenous communities and records. While the *Reconciliation Framework* is a useful starting point, simply referencing it cannot stand in the place of working with IBPOC scholars and archivists at the outset, when priorities are set and the work to come is shaped.

In the end, the authors of this note were left wondering whether the CCA, specifically, is the right body to steward Canadian descriptive standards. Since the first chapters of *RAD* were published in 1990, there has been only one light revision to the standard, in 2008. There is no routine cycle of review and updating of *RAD*, and this has resulted in the standard's stagnation and increasing irrelevance to contemporary archival concerns. This was well described by Dancy in 2012 and is unchanged since, despite the discussions of 2016. The CCA's institutional opacity is unlikely to lead to the kinds of "liberatory standards" called for in the archival literature²⁸ or to the transparency and open development of key standards such as the SAA's ongoing work to maintain *DACS*.²⁹

28 Wendy M. Duff and Verne Harris, "Stories and Names: Archival Description as Narrating Records and Constructing Meanings," *Archival Science* 2, no. 3–4 (2002): 263–85.

29 See the work of the Technical Subcommittee on *Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS)*: <https://www2.archivists.org/groups/technical-subcommittee-on-describing-archives-a-content-standard-dacs>.

What Next?

As the Canadian archival community continues to work toward revising or replacing *RAD*, we believe there are several points to be acknowledged. Before any work begins on revising *RAD*, drafting a new standard, or adapting an existing standard, clear guiding principles and criteria for assessment must be developed. Canadian archivists need to articulate what a descriptive standard is to do. This requires open conversation among archivists, archival educators, and other scholars to revisit the purpose of descriptive standards, compare models for descriptive standards, and discuss the need (or not) for a distinctly national standard in Canada. We need to explore issues related to colonialism, reparative description, expanded provenance, structured and linked data, user expectations, and many other topics. This process needs to be accountable to the communities archives serve; archival communities deserve to be engaged in consultations, and archivy needs to conduct robust research into the needs of archival users. Tremendous change has impacted archival work since the 2015 consultations, and any work on revising, adapting, or developing standards must be grounded in an understanding of the needs of our users and the different contexts in which descriptive work happens and is received. The consultation stage should include recognition of the ways technology and local practices shape the implementation of any standard and of the implications of operationalizing a standard in both current and future descriptive software and systems.³⁰ The Canadian archival community needs to know that all of the clever and sometimes kludgy ways they have made *RAD* work over the past three decades will not be left behind, wherever our search for updated standards and best practices takes us.

Equally, we believe that a transparent process that is accountable to the professional community, and that takes seriously commitments made through the *Reconciliation Framework*, is foundational to the success of any efforts in this area. Whatever is decided, the resulting standard will need to be revised and updated on a regular schedule. This requires a standing committee, accountable and answering to the professional community, that engages in a regular cycle of consultation and revision. Examples of committees that work this way can

³⁰ For example, many archivists are taking advantage of features in AtoM that enable them to address various issues in description that have been raised since *RAD* was last revised, including the creation of lower-level descriptions and rich access points that can document relationships beyond a singular creator and represent expanded conceptions of provenance and place.

be found in the First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC), which views stewarding the principles of ownership, control, access, and possession (OCAP) as a primary responsibility, and the Society of American Archivists' Standards Committee, whose mandate includes regular review, maintenance, and reporting.³¹

This last set of points suggests to us that there is another question for the archival community to consider as it grapples with the question of what to do about *RAD*: where is the proper home for this work? The authors of this note have serious doubts that the CCA should be this home. The organization has demonstrated its limited capacity for standards development through inconsistent efforts to review and maintain *RAD*, extended periods of neglect, and its recent failure to convene a standards committee in a manner consistent with its own draft terms of reference and with the commitments it made by endorsing the *Reconciliation Framework*. The result is that the Canadian archival community continues to rely on descriptive standards that are ill-suited for contemporary archival practice.

The council's bylaws do not explicitly state that it is mandated to develop standards for the Canadian archival community. Is it time for the ACA to convene its own standards committee and take on archival description standards? Is this work that could emerge from the National Indigenous Knowledge and Language Alliance (NIKLA)'s Respectful Terminology Platform project? What is the most appropriate organizational home for Canadian archival description standards?

Our recent experiences have made a few things clear. Whatever organization is the home for Canadian archival standards, this organization must prioritize the development of sound methodologies and well-defined assessment criteria. The committee charged with this work, and the larger organization of which the committee is part, must have transparent governance processes and be able to communicate its activities to the broader archival community. The organization must encourage discussion and seek diverse perspectives. Above all else, the organization must seriously engage with the relevant recommendations made in the *Reconciliation Framework*. Perhaps, if we do this, we can finally end the Eurocentric "voyage of *RAD*" and prepare for the "new canoe" of Indigenous, and non-Indigenous, memory work.

31 Society of American Archivists, "Standards Committee," SAA, accessed February 18, 2025, <https://www2.archivists.org/governance/handbook/section7/groups/Standards>.

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